

July 6, 2000: Commission: Don't Let Sudan Off the Hook

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today issued a statement urging Congress and the Administration not to lift sanctions on Sudan before that country takes verifiable steps to end religious persecution and engage in serious negotiations to end the country's 17-year civil war. The text of the statement follows:

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom notes a recent flurry of diplomatic activity regarding Sudan. The Khartoum government is trying to end United Nations sanctions imposed after Sudan gave refuge to would-be assassins who attacked Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1995. It is engaged in diplomatic efforts to gain a regional seat on the U.N. Security Council. U.S. Special Envoy Harry Johnston recently visited Khartoum and an American delegation traveled there this week to discuss terrorism issues. Meanwhile, the House of Representatives appears to be on the verge of enacting legislation that would lift an embargo on food and medicine sales to Cuba - but also to Iran, Libya, North Korea, and Sudan.

Much has been written in recent days about Sudan as a sponsor of terrorist groups and whether Khartoum has turned over a new leaf. That is a judgment for others to make. What the Islamist extremist regime in Khartoum has not done, however, is to end severe violations of religious freedom or engage in serious negotiations to end the 17-year civil war it has waged against the people of the south, who are mostly Christian or followers of traditional African religions. Sudan's genocidal conduct and crimes against humanity in this war include deliberate bombing attacks on civilian facilities (including churches, schools, and famine-relief centers), slavery, massacres, forced conversion to Islam, and the use of deliberate starvation as a weapon of war. Nearly 2 million people, mostly southerners, have perished in this conflict, a large percentage from famine. Muslims in the north who do not subscribe to the government's extremist interpretation of Islam and Islamic law face similar harsh treatment. As the Commission found in its May 1 Annual Report to Congress and the Administration, "the government of Sudan is the world's most violent of abuser of the right to freedom of religion and belief."

Last September, the State Department named Sudan a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), labeling it a "particularly severe" violator of religious freedom. It has been sanctioned under that act as well as under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) for "denial of religious freedom." A finding that Sudan is or is not sponsoring terrorism in no way changes its liability to IRFA and IEEPA sanctions for engaging in egregious religious persecution. Indeed, barring sudden improvement, Sudan will almost certainly be named again this coming September as a country of particular concern and the sanctions renewed.

Given these facts, the Commission strongly urges Congress not to mandate any lifting of sanctions against Sudan applied under the IRFA - which call for the U.S. to oppose loans or other financial benefits from international financial institutions to Sudan - until and unless Khartoum gives verifiable evidence of ending religious persecution and of engaging in serious negotiations towards ending the civil war. In addition, until the same conditions are met, the Commission urges the President and Secretary of State 1) not to upgrade bilateral diplomatic relations; and 2) use the U.S. veto in the Security Council if necessary to ensure that Sudan not obtain a Security Council seat. Finally, the Commission urges that Congress and the Administration study and implement the Commission's comprehensive recommendations regarding Sudan contained in its May 1 report. Among those was a recommendation that the U.S. increase the amount of humanitarian aid to needy Sudanese that is shipped via programs that the Khartoum government cannot veto.

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